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## RS 301 Oral History: Interview With Pastor Willy Bowles

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Isobel McAusland

April 30, 2021

Religion in America

Oral History with Pastor Willy Bowles

Lifehouse Humboldt

Bell: Could you please give me a brief overview of the services that were provided before COVID?

Pastor Bowles: Uh, sure. Before COVID we had three Sunday morning services, one in Fortuna, one in Eureka, and one in Mckinleyville. And then we had a Sunday night in Arcata, and along with that we had another Friday night in Fortuna, we had a Wednesday night in Eureka, we had a Friday night in Mckinleyville. And then we also have a Bible college, Bethel School of Supernatural Discipleship, and so they would have, I think it was once a month, a Saturday night that's outside of their normal class time. And then we have youth services in Eureka on Wednesday, we have youth services in Fortuna on Thursday. We almost have something every day of the week, basically. Along with parenting classes on Tuesday night, and yeah, just honestly I know for a fact that I don't know everything that we do.

...

Bell: Is there a time of year, or maybe an event or holiday that causes a greater need for service?

Pastor Bowles: ...You know, especially with COVID, I mean the suicide rate is astronomical, you know. We're not the Church that has stood out and protested, you know, and said that COVID isn't real. We believe COVID is a real thing and it's a danger, but, you know, three months ago we made a choice that we were going to open our doors, whether it was allowed or not. Only because, you know, I personally don't know anybody who's died from COVID. We

have three people who were attached to our community that have committed suicide. So I called the County Health Department, I called the Sheriff's Department and I just let them know, listen, we're going to open, because at this point in time, we feel that mental health is more of a serious issue than COVID is to our people. You know, fortunately, we live in a great county, and they were 100% behind us opening, and so we've opened. I mean, we've done the social distancing and the masks and the temperatures, you know, all the stuff we should do. But people -- people need people. People need to be with other people and so it's been a real crisis and a real tragedy to see what's happened with suicide.

I think the great tragedy of COVID is it has made us afraid of each other. Now, you see it in a store. You walk into a store and even though you're masked up and stuff you go to walk by somebody and everybody separates. And it's like, we're not designed to be afraid of each other.

Bell: How did your practice change due to the Pandemic?

Pastor Bowles: Well yeah, it was pretty dramatic for us in the beginning. I mean we had to go, you know, they shut down in April last year or March, whenever it was. Yeah we shut down everything. We did online services only, we were in the building with ten of us filming a Sunday morning service, then putting it online. And, you know, that's not what Church is supposed to be. Church isn't supposed to be something that you watch, Church is supposed to be something that you participate in, and a community that you grow together, and love together, and learn together, and, you know, do all the things that you're supposed to do together. And so it really took a toll on us. Our school had to shut down, yeah, so it was super dramatic. It was a big hit for us, and you know, even right now our Eureka service where we were seeing 350 [attendees], I think we had 80 there last Sunday morning. People are slowly coming back, and we're still doing

services online, I mean we do that now, we'll probably always continue. So you'll always have people watching from home, but, you know, it's just a bummer.

Bell: Yeah, I definitely agree with that sentiment. So, did the school shut down, did it not do classes? Or were classes still going online?

Pastor Bowles: We were not prepared at all for that. And for us to go online, it just didn't work. So we have a school we're attached to in Redding and they were doing online classes, they were ready, so our students were able to go and participate in that. But, you know, we're different than they are because even our school, like, what we do is so focused on community. You know, what we do in school is not 'go read a book, go write a report,' you know, it's 'hey, let's sit and talk about this, let's talk about Jesus, let's talk about what his call is. Let's talk about how he's supposed to change your life,' and you and I are going to have a conversation and bounce things back and forth. You can't do that online, you know, it just doesn't work. So we did shut our school down, and this year we have our lowest enrollment that we've had ever, and it looks like next year is even going to be worse. So we're still not recovering from it. But we'll get it back. It will be okay, but, you know, it's just an adjustment for everyone.

Bell: Do you think your community will continue to see some of the changes that you've made, even after social distancing is not required?

Pastor Bowles: That's a really good question, and here's the thing;. COVID has not been all bad. Now, horrible thing, you know, we're not downplaying that. But there's been some things that we've learned through COVID that I hope we definitely keep. One is it's caused us to slow down. Before COVID I was traveling every month...I haven't traveled in over a year now, and honestly I don't ever want to go back to that. I'm happy at home, I have dinner with my kids at home, you know, so I want the pace that happened out of COVID to stay. I want to continue to

slow down and enjoy family, and enjoy friends. And honestly I think the Church is going to come out stronger, because I think our community is going to end up being even stronger than it was going into COVID. Because I think we had a great community that all-of-the-sudden got squashed, and sometimes you don't appreciate what you have until it's taken away. And now that it's been taken away, I think people really appreciate what we have and what we are. And so I think that the tendency, the need for them to come back even stronger-- I think our community is just going to be even bigger and better, honestly.

Bell: Yeah, people recognize the position you play in their lives and the importance of that community.

Pastor Bowles: Yeah, you know it's funny because Churches were deemed...non-essential. And I think you look at it, you see what happened, you see what happens with the suicide rates and everything else, and I just think that was flat out wrong. I think that what we do is essential. To connect people in a human way, to have people know that they have other people there that love them and care for them, and are for them -- I think that is essential. So I really am encouraged by what I see coming out of this and where we're going in the future.